

## Commentary on “Social Capital in Thailand: Unraveling the Myths of Rural-Urban Divide”

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In July 2013 you gave us 2 reports about Social Capital in Thailand. One is titled “Survey Report on Social Capital and Related Issues in Thailand”, which was dated February 2013. Another is a good study paper, titled “Social Capital in Thailand: Unraveling the Myths of Rural-Urban Divide”, which was dated 25<sup>th</sup> June 2013. Especially the second one, with an ambitious title, interested me.

Today, I wish to discuss with you about 2 points in your second paper. One is about “the myths of rural-urban divide”, and second is about so-called “top-down Volunteer”.

The first one, about “the myths of rural-urban divide”. According to your report, development theories or policies since World War II have been based on dichotomy of rural-urban, or basically modern-traditional. In Thailand, based on this theory, limited resources have been invested in to the urban area more than rural area. As a result, the development policies in Thailand have increased made inequalities between urban and rural area much wider than before.

If you depend on the myths or European theory of Social Capital, based on this traditional dichotomy, “*rural people should have higher levels of bonding social capital than urban people, on the contrary urban people should have higher levels of bridging social capital than rural people*”. But the result of our research shows that the fact is different. You show 2 tables as follows.

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**Table 1 Bonding social capital indicators (mean)**

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
Network 1	Frequency of meeting with relatives	3.00	3.66	2.84
Network 2	Frequency of meeting with friends and acquaintances	2.94	3.06	2.82
Network 3	Relationship with neighborhood	3.12	3.32	2.91
	Depth of relationship with neighborhood	2.77	2.88	2.78
Help 1	Received help from relatives, friends and neighbors	2.03	2.15	1.92

**Table 2 Bridging social capital indicators (percent)**

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
Social 1	Participates in voluntary organization/activities	53.5	46.8	42.3
Social 2	Thinks that activities in community are very active or having some degree of activities	69.9	75.6	64.2
Social 3	Thinks that volunteer activities have been productive	30.6	33.2	28.0
Social 4	Would join volunteer activities in the future	20.0	24.5	15.5

The result is that bonding social capital is indeed at a higher level in the rural area than in the urban area, but the other hand bridging social capital is also at a higher level in the rural area than the urban. From this data you said that the conventional dichotomy of urban=rural or modern=traditional is a myth. This myth has no reality in Thailand. I think, you would like to say, your thesis applies to not only Thailand but also Asian countries in general.

And then, you find volunteer activities as a reason for the higher level of bridging social capital in the rural area. But the characteristics of these volunteer activities in the rural area is operated by the government, you can say, they are “state-directed”. Voluntary organizations in Thailand are bureaucratic, administrative, hierarchical and has patronage relations. As a consequence, this situation in Thailand reproduces “unequal power relation that becomes a source of citizens' dissatisfaction of the state apparatus and lower levels of social trust”.

Now turning to our point of view, we previously assumed the urban-rural dichotomy that you would like to unravel. In my opinion (not all of our project, but just my opinion), a rapid expansion and penetration of the commodity economy in some of remarkable developing Asian countries will break traditional sector into pieces, for better or worse. Then, in the future through the destruction of the traditional social relationships, new relationships will be built by persons who connect each other, not through kinship ties or traditional communities. I hope it will be a democratic civil society. With this view I would like to see what's going on in Asia now, whether they are changing or not. Your report is unlaveling my assumption. But it inspires and interests me greatly. Indeed it's wonderful.

Then I have 2 more questions that I would like to ask you. First, as you pointed out in your report, one of the rural areas that you researched, Bangkurai had accepted many volunteer

after the flood disaster in 2011. So that in Bangkurai it is natural that the level of their interest in voluntary activities and of their willingness to participate in such activities is high. But how are other rural areas in Thailand? I wonder if you could generalize these data in Bangkurai. Second, the rural areas that you researched and I myself also have visited, Bangkurai and Panusnikom, are special areas. They are very close to Bangkok, therefore the income per capita is higher than the average, and landscape are changing as suburbs to big cities such as Bangkok or Chonburi. In these areas, a difference between the urban and the rural is now not clear. I wonder if you could represent these areas as rural area in general.

Well, I would like to ask you to give me your opinion about so-called “state-directed volunteer”. This word has a paradoxical meaning. As we were trying to find volunteer activities as indicator of social capital, we faced difficulties. It means that most of volunteer activities in four countries in Indochinese Peninsula are “state-directed volunteer”, as you say in your report. It is not only the case in socialistic Vietnam and Lao, but also in Thailand and Cambodia. You said that this type of voluntary organizations and activities in Thailand reproduce “unequal power relation that becomes a source of citizens' dissatisfaction of state apparatus and lower levels of social trust”. How do you understand this so-called “state-directed volunteer”, it might be called “volunteering of complementary to system”? This type of volunteering might prevent you from forming the other type of volunteer activities or organizations organized by citizen. Or even if the type of volunteering is “state-directed”, it could promote the other type of volunteering, that is grass-roots movement. What do you think of this problem?

Additionally I would like to point out that this issue is important in Japan, too. Indeed after the big earthquakes in Osaka and Kobe 1995, and especially after the earthquakes and tsunami disaster in eastern Japan 2011, we could find the grass-roots activities valuable. And in 2000 so-called NPO-law was enforced, as a result volunteer organizations are recognized as corporate body, or legal person. Since then many NPO organizations can possess their own properties and enter into contract as a contractor. Since then they have been active. But you cannot distinguish between “top-down organization” from administrative or local trade association and grass-roots voluntary organizations that you find in Germany as *Bürger Initiative*. It may be possible to criticize them as “top-down volunteer organization”. This type of organizations reduce heavy responsibility and financial burden of the government, it means that it just complements government or the existing social system, it does not play a role of an element of social reform for democracy or civil society.

It is difficult to conclude on this point. I can only say, it is not productive to make difference between “state-directed volunteer” and “voluntary volunteer” (it's funny to say) strictly. While an organization can be “top-down type”, it might promote “grass-roots type” and also promote public consciousness of individual. I would like to point out the possibility rather than my wishful thinking. What do you think of this issue?